

## What is that in your hand?

1Cor. 12:4-7      Exodus 3:7-14 &4:1-5

### Exodus 3:7-14

<sup>7</sup>Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup>and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

<sup>11</sup>But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup>He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." <sup>13</sup>But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" <sup>14</sup>God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God reveals a bit more about himself and his plan, then we pick up at ch.4:

### Exodus 4:1-5

<sup>4</sup>Then Moses answered, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" <sup>2</sup>The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." <sup>3</sup>And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. <sup>4</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail" —so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— <sup>5</sup>"so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."

This is the word of the Lord!

There is a story from the 19<sup>th</sup> century about a Portuguese sailing ship that ran out of drinking water off the coast of south America. After days of suffering dehydration a second ship appeared on the horizon. The Portuguese ship was able to send a message, describing its predicament and asking for help. The reply came back, “Lower your buckets.” They did, and found that the water they brought up was fresh water. Was it a miracle? No. They learned that they were anchored at the mouth of the Amazon River and didn’t know it, and all the water around them was fresh water.

In a similar way, you and I already possess resources—we may not know it yet—but we all possess resources that can be used, not just to survive but to thrive and to serve, and even become leaders in a way that is consistent with who we are and what God has placed in and around our lives. And that is the thrust of the question that God put to Moses: What is that in your hand?

Moses’ life and story is the stuff of novels & movies. When Pharaoh instituted a mass slaughter of the male Hebrew infants, Moses’ mother hid him near a stream where Pharaoh’s daughter found him and raised him. He became the Prince of Egypt, Pharaoh’s right-hand man, until one day he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and in a fit of rage Moses impulsively killed the Egyptian.

He then fled for his life and settled in the desert and lived and worked for 40 years as a shepherd. Now there's a career change! From vice president to solitary sheep herder. And this is where God appears to Moses, in the famous burning bush where we have the question-and-answer dialogue we just read.

There, God calls Moses to serve him and be a leader. But Moses makes excuses, and he asks questions that resist God's call on his life. Let's take a quick look at Moses' excuses. Because like Moses, we, too, are invited to serve God, perhaps even in places of leadership—maybe not in such a spectacular way, maybe not up front or publicly, but we are invited to serve nonetheless. And like Moses, we're not always thrilled about it and perhaps we resist or decline the invitation.

Moses speaks for a lot of us in responding to God's call to serve. His excuses and questions boil down to 3:

1. Serving is inconvenient. God's call comes at an inconvenient time for Moses. He's been a shepherd for 40 years, he's married, he has a family, he has job security, and he feels like he's getting on in years.

You can almost hear Moses saying, "God, this isn't a great time for another career change. I mean, you're a little late. I'm comfortably settled into my

lifestyle. Maybe if you had showed up about 30 years ago that would've been better timing. And besides, "Deliverer of My People" wouldn't look that good on a resume anymore anyway. Maybe when I have more time; then I can do a little 'delivering of your people' on the side. But not right now. It's not a good time. It's inconvenient.

2. He feels inadequate. This may be **our** #1 excuse. I've heard this one more than any other, over the years—and it's been my excuse, too.

"Who am I?" Moses asks. I'm nobody, I'm slow of speech, I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm not sure if you know what you're doing by asking me to do this—and, I don't even know your name.

Floating around in the back of Moses' mind is that he's a criminal. Years before, he killed an Egyptian in rage. And so, I think Moses might also be saying, "I've blown it." There's no way a holy you, can use an unholy me. I'm inadequate—in terms of my abilities *and* in terms of my personal history & failure.

3. His third excuse: serving is hard. It'll cost something, and he knows it.

So he comes up with a list of potential costs:

- “I’m just one little person; I can’t come up against pharaoh.”  
In other words, I might get hurt, or humiliated.
- “The people might not believe me,” he says. In other words, I might get rejected. Serving and leading might be lonely.

And on and on he goes. Moses suffers from an over-anticipation of all the possible costs, all the potential difficulties: what if, what if. Sometimes we resist serving or leading because we worry about the potential costs and all the what-ifs. Yet God simply calls us to be faithful, and do what he asks.

Now it needs to be said that the truth is, (1) serving is sometimes inconvenient, (2) we never feel completely adequate, and (3) it can be hard. Welcome to being a servant of God! Especially if you’re in leadership.

In this story, God has two responses to the excuses that Moses brings:

**First**, is simply two words: “I am.” (in Hebrew it’s actually one word). In the face of Moses’ excuses, God says “I am.” The Hebrew is a little difficult to translate: Most often: I am. Also: I am who I am; or I will be who I will be; I am the one that is; I am always is-ing.

It's this present tense, verb name. But whatever it means, if you look at it, it doesn't seem like a great comfort to Moses at first: "I am?!? What does that mean?" It actually seems a little unsettling to Moses. I think he was looking for a little more clarity from God.

But, this is God's answer to Moses' fears and worries about serving. God is almost making a pun here with his name; it's a marvelous play on words:

Moses keeps asking, "*Who am I* to deliver your people?" "*Who am I* to confront pharaoh?" "*Who am I* to speak to the people?" And God responds: "I am."

God reverses Moses' self-focus: his "who am I?" questions become God's "I am" answer. The issue is not "Who am I?" The issue is "who is this '**I am**' that goes with me?"

Whenever we serve and lead it's this verbing, is-ing, always I Am-ing God that empowers us and sustains us. It's the same God who became human in the person of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, whose Spirit dwells in us, who promised he will never leave us or forsake us. Look at all of the I Am statements of Jesus in John's gospel... I am the good shepherd; I am the light of the world; I

am the bread of life (communion!); and so on. These are all assurances of who he is and of his presence with us always.

The truth is, we are not always fully qualified to do the things God calls us to do. But God doesn't call the qualified; he qualifies the called. Another way to put it: God doesn't call those who are equipped; he equips those who are called. The truth is, we all possess the resources to do what God asks us to do—much of the time we just don't know it yet. We need God to bring them to light, up to awareness, to point them out to us and activate them in us.

Which leads to God's second response to Moses' resistance. God's **second** response to Moses comes in the form of a question (here is our question for this week, what God wants to know). In the midst of *Moses'* questioning, God asks *him* a question: "What is that in your hand?"

It's a shepherd's staff. A common, ordinary, everyday thing. If you've seen one, you've seen them all, right? But it's that simple staff that's going to send the plagues on Egypt; it's that simple staff that will part the red sea; it's that simple staff that will draw water from a rock in the wilderness so that people can live.

It's an ordinary thing, but with God it became extraordinary. Think about what this staff represented, in terms of preparing Moses for the service God was now calling him to:

The staff represented that Moses had learned how to live in the desert wilderness for 40 years. An ordinary skill, unless what you need to do is lead the people in desert wilderness for 40 more years.

The staff also represents the fact that Moses is a shepherd. Again, an ordinary skill, until you think about it: sheep are sometimes stubborn, easily frightened, and difficult to lead. So, working with sheep is probably not bad training for someone who is about to lead people who can sometimes be... 😊.

An ordinary thing in his hand, and ordinary experiences become good training. As with Moses, God uses the ordinary item or experience that we already have in our hand, and transforms it and makes it extraordinary for his purposes.

It's significant in this dialogue with God at the burning bush that Moses is told to throw the staff down. To let go of it. God did something extraordinary with it, in the moment, to help Moses believe and increase his faith, and then



Moses had to receive it back with a new understanding of the power God had to transform that ordinary thing.

And when we let go of what's in our hand, lay it down, so to speak, and surrender it, God transforms the ordinary thing, the ordinary skill, the ordinary experience—he transforms it, and then gives it back to us for extraordinary use.

So, what's in ***your*** hand, today? This is the great stewardship question, to put it in Presbyterian terms. Capitol One wants to know: *what's in your wallet?* And God wants to know that too, because it all belongs to God—including our finances. But this question God asks, “What's in your hand?,” is the larger and better stewardship question, because it isn't just about money. It's a more holistic approach to stewardship which involves our whole life. So, again, what's in your hand this morning?

This question that God asked Moses was designed to help him, and us, discover that we already have the resources needed to do what God wants to accomplish through us. We can begin with what we have. And we all have something! 1Cor. passage—everyone has something to offer. Not just some people, or only specially talented people or super spiritual people. But everyone!

What do you and I have in our hand? I would invite each of us to think about that question this week. It could be an obvious thing like our skill or training; or a tangible resource. And, it could be something we hadn't thought of, like an experience that has set us on a different trajectory, because God has transformed it into something that can be a blessing to others. Maybe it's the gift of time.

A story from right here in the greater Seattle area:

Bud: a veterinarian who wanted nothing more than to be a missionary, caring for peoples' animals in third world countries and helping farmers raise healthy livestock—and then using that as an opportunity to talk about Jesus with the people he was serving. But because of certain allergies and physical sensitivities that would've made him sick on the mission field, he was turned down wherever he applied. Disappointed, but determined, he looked around the city of Seattle for places to serve as a local missionary. It finally occurred to him and his wife that many homeless people have pets—dogs, cats, birds—and the idea came to open a free clinic, one day a week, for the pets of homeless people. He worked to get the support he needed, and then through that ministry he became a witness to God's love on the streets of Seattle. That free clinic ran for

several years, until Bud died of cancer. On the day of his memorial service the sanctuary was filled with homeless people, and... their pets. It was the only time when dogs and cats and other animals were allowed in the church. What did Bud have in his hand? His veterinary skill, a heart for the poor, his disappointment, and a closed door that led him to an open one, to bless homeless people in Jesus' name.

What's in your hand? We're not all called to be Moses. Moses' story is fairly spectacular and unusual. But we *are* all called to serve; we are all called to use whatever resources God has placed in our hand—to surrender them, relinquish control, and let God do above and beyond what we thought was possible.